

Leopoldo López Gil: the need to reinforce European presence in Central America and the Caribbean

A member of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly, the Spanish MEP is an advocate of human rights, democracy and public security at the heart of the Americas. A long-running combat in which he would like to see “the cultural and historical proximity between the European Union and Latin American and Caribbean countries converted into genuine policies” to guarantee the autonomy and stability of both continents.

Extract from the interview with Leopoldo López Gil.

An explosion of vulnerabilities

“Central American nations, among them Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic have voiced a lot of concern about the interplay between drug trafficking and irregular migration, which is the main driver of the explosion in violence,” explains Leopoldo López Gil. These migrants are exploited as a workforce for the underground economy, operating as mules or in prostitution networks in order to survive. “More than 200,000 Haitian migrants are currently in the Dominican Republic, having left their country without official documents. 7.2 million Venezuelans have also fled poverty, spreading out across the whole of South America. Some have headed for the United States via Central America, while around a million have tried to migrate to Europe. [Porous borders and] a lack of documentation represent major threats to the security of the countries crossed by the migratory corridors”, continues the MEP.

Migration in Central America has grown by 40% over the past decade, increasing from 2.8 to 3.9 million in the heart of the Northern Triangle comprising Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Since 2014, the El Niño weather phenomenon has undermined both food security and household incomes, causing the departure of at least one member from 96% of households. And the countries in the region are among the most sensitive to global warming. “Unfortunately, there are few concrete measures in terms of regional security [while] transnational crime continues to run to the heart of the continent's political, financial and judicial systems,” laments the Spanish representative. Corruption scandals and the lack of coordinated responses have led to a tightening of migration policies and the militarisation of public security in response to insecurity.

Jus ad bellum

In El Salvador, on a single day in March 2022, 87 people affiliated to the "Maras", gangs such as MS13 and Barrio18, were murdered. Since then, President Nayib Bukele has been waging an "all-out war" on these criminal groups. He has promulgated a "State of Exception" to facilitate the tracking down of gang members. Between March 2022 and 2023, more than 70,000 people were imprisoned, awaiting trial, while 153 detainees died as a result of torture or untreated injuries. In May, the Assembly voted to purchase 8 Hurricane tactical armoured vehicles worth 3.6 million dollars as part of the "Territorial Control Plan", designed to curb the territorial control of the "maras"¹.

Institutionalising dialogue with Europe

While Europe has made modest commitments via programmes such as Copolad, El Pacto and Eurofront, the conclusions of the EU-Celac summit in July outline a desire to deepen bi-regional dialogue. "The EU does not pay enough attention to security and defence issues with Latin America and the Caribbean, and therefore does not have a specific strategy in this area. Yet the final declaration of the EU-Celac summit is an unusual document for this type of meeting. Around ten pages long, the text resembles a work programme institutionalising a permanent bi-regional dialogue. This is a genuine step forward that could lead to the establishment of an organisation capable of centralising documentation and effectively monitoring the application of the decisions taken," maintains the MEP.

To begin with, the Global Gateway plans to invest more than €45 billion to finance 135 new projects in the region. At the same time, Brussels has signed a double memorandum of understanding². A forestry partnership with Honduras is currently being negotiated as part of the European Green Agenda. The other agreement aims to accelerate "digital transformation, green transition, prevention of violence, women's empowerment and support to youth" in El

¹ Revista Defensa InfoDefensa, El Congreso de El Salvador aprueba el pago de ocho blindados tácticos Hurricane por 3,6 millones de dólares, <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/4302470/congreso-salvador-aprueba-fondos-36-millones-dolares-pagar-blindados-tacticos-hurricane>.

² Ursula von Der Leyen, Statement by the President following the EU-CELAC Summit https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_3927, 18 July 2023.

Salvador, according to Josep Borrell, the head of EU diplomacy³. The EU is also stepping up its humanitarian aid to Haiti with an emergency package worth €10 million, donating a total of €18.5 million for the 5.2 million people in need of humanitarian aid in the country, which is riven by insecurity. To build lasting cooperation, "the EU must build on its cultural and historical links with Latin America and the Caribbean, with which we have a proximity that exists on no other continent. This heritage must be transformed into genuine policies to meet the challenges of our time. This continent has seen some of the poorest economic development in the last fifty years. Europe should launch appropriate education and workforce training programmes to increase the productivity of South American workers. This is an existential need that goes beyond regional security," concludes Leopoldo López Gil.

³ Josep Borrell, El Salvador: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell after the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding | EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/el-salvador-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-after-signature-memorandum_en , 17 July 2023.